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## Political Theatre: Entertainment or Instrument of Social Change?

Olivia M. Matthews

University of South Carolina - Columbia, om1matthews@gmail.com

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POLITICAL THEATRE: ENTERTAINMENT OR INSTRUMENT OF SOCIAL CHANGE?

By

Olivia Meredith Matthews

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for  
Graduation with Honors from the  
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Approved:

*David J. Britt*

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David Britt  
Director of Thesis

*Catherine Keyser*

---

Catherine Keyser  
Second Reader

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Steve Lynn, Dean  
For South Carolina Honors College

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## THESIS SUMMARY

This paper explores political theatre as a means of conveying information and inspiring action regarding socio-political issues. Through a staged reading of *The Exonerated*,<sup>1</sup> and subsequent audience discussion and survey, the effectiveness of theatre as a means of commenting on political problems was explored. The conclusion was reached that theatre is uniquely suited for this role due to the emotional human connection forged by seeing examples of real people dealing with the addressed issues.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2020, it is very hard to find an American who is not concerned with politics in one way or another. Whether they are an uninsured person concerned about access to healthcare, an immigrant, or an affluent business executive hoping for tax cuts, our modern society is highly politicized. After the controversial 2016 election of Donald Trump, the United States of America saw a shift in political engagement. The average midterm voting turnout over the past 50 years was 40.82%, however, in the 2018 midterm elections the percentage of the voting eligible population who went to the polls was 50%.<sup>2</sup> Following this data, political scientists expect to see an increased voter turnout in November 2020.

The way we consume political information is also changing. With the death of the newspaper industry, and the rising partisanship of television news channels, growing numbers of Americans are getting at least a portion of their political information, news, and current events from social media platforms like Facebook.<sup>3</sup> Because of this shift toward unconventional ways of

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<sup>1</sup> Script by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen

<sup>2</sup> Data from FairVote.org

<sup>3</sup> *Politics and the Mass Media* course taught by Dr. Donald Fowler at the University of South Carolina

consuming information, as well as the highly politicized time we are currently living in, more and more theatre is addressing salient issues. The focus of this thesis was chosen because of my passion for both political science and theatre, and my recognition that theatre can be used to teach, inspire, and change the world.

I will begin by proposing my definition of political theatre and then examining different theories of political theatre and related topics in order to illustrate why my offered definition is more applicable. After exploring this theoretical understanding of political theatre, I will shift into a specific study of the play *The Exonerated* as an example of this genre. I will explain my process of putting on a staged reading of the play and analyze the information I gathered from a talk-back discussion after the show. From the first-hand data I collected, I will incorporate other sources to show that theatre has a unique ability to convey information to viewers in a way that differs from any intellectual lecture, newspaper article, or post on social media. From this finding, I will then urge further research to be done on the matter, as well as positing that more resources should be dedicated to political theatre because of its substantial impact on society.

## **DEFINITION OF POLITICAL THEATRE**

“What’s in a name?”<sup>4</sup> Since Shakespeare first posed this question between two star-crossed lovers, people have wrestled with the importance of names. Does a name change the thing itself, or is it merely an arbitrary label? Psychologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and everyone in between have confronted this issue. Many have found that names are, in fact, quite important. Knowing how to classify something, while not changing the sweet smell of the rose

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<sup>4</sup> From William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* 2.2.46

itself, does help us process and order the sensations we are experiencing. It is for that reason that I tackle this first, most fundamental question: what is political theatre?

What I will describe as political theatre might be something others call a different name. Perhaps popular theatre, social theatre, or applied theatre. Similarly, other people's idea of political theatre might be something slightly different from my three-point criteria. All of these possibilities are wonderful and showcase the vast uncertainty of our world. However, for the purposes of this paper, there must be an agreement as to what is being referred to when using the term "political theatre." I will go on to defend my definition, but for the purposes of this paper, political theatre refers to: (1) a piece of drama that need not be a live performance – it could be a play, musical, film, or television show;<sup>5</sup> (2) that has a central message regarding a poignant socio-political issue; (3) that has the intention of inspiring an examination of, or teaching a lesson regarding, that central socio-political issue.

All three of these criteria must be met in order for a piece to be classified as political theatre. A protest on the streets might have a central message that is meant to be considered, but it is not a theatrical work, so it is not political theatre. A show like *Hairspray*<sup>6</sup> might have a through-line regarding integration, racism, and body positivity, however, these issues are neither the central message of the story, nor is there a clear call to examine them in a deeper way. So even though there are significant political issues that arise as a product of the time period in which the musical is set, because the creators of the musical were not centrally focused on those issues, *Hairspray* would not be classified as political theatre. The Netflix series *When They See*

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<sup>5</sup> Although my definition of political theatre is broad enough to include works that are not live performances, the remainder of this paper will focus primarily on live theatre since my creative project was putting on a staged reading of a play.

<sup>6</sup> Musical with book by Mark O'Donnell and Thomas Meehan, music by Marc Shaiman, and lyrics by Scott Wittman and Marc Shaiman

*Us*, however, does satisfy all three of these requirements. Its portrayal of the events surrounding the wrongful conviction of the so-called “Central Park Five” is a plea to viewers to consider the society that allows these types of mistakes to be made. Therefore, it is an example of political theatre.

## **ALTERNATIVES AND DEFENSE**

### **Political Theatre**

Political theatre is taken by some to refer only to theatre dealing directly with the government or a political process. This mindset is exemplified in Michael Kirby’s 1975 article, “On Political Theatre,” where he espoused a very literal approach to understanding political theatre. Kirby employed the Webster dictionary definitions of “political” in order to set criteria for political theatre. He focused specifically on the definition, “of or concerned with government, the state, or politics” (129, 1975). To Kirby, this meant that only plays that make “explicit reference to contemporary governmental problems and issues” (130, 1975) or are directly impacted by government – such as being subject to censorship – are examples of political theatre. Kirby claimed that “most plays make no political statement” (129, 1975), to which I adamantly disagree. By relying much too heavily on dictionary definitions and ignoring societal norms,<sup>7</sup> Kirby’s narrow view resulted in his failure to acknowledge how integrated societal issues and politics truly are.

In 2020, a Gallup poll found that some of the most important political issues to American voters are the economy, education, healthcare, terrorism and national security, immigration, gun

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<sup>7</sup> It is quite possible that back in 1975 when Kirby wrote this article, politics and social issues were not as interwoven as they are in 2020. However, the point still remains that political issues are frequently addressed in theatre without being discussed in the context of the political process.

policies, race relations, abortion, wealth and income inequality, climate change, and LGBTQ+ rights. Most of these issues do not deal directly with how the government is run, but they are issues of public policy. Public policy deals with social laws and the interaction of the political with the real world. Therefore, a play about the destruction of our environment is clearly discussing a political subject, but Kirby would argue that if it does not take a specific political stance on the issue and make some call to action, then it would not be classified as political theatre. I disagree with this idea that a play must take an explicit political stance in order to be an example of political theatre. Inspiring audiences to explore the topic and form their own opinion is just as valuable as an inciteful call to action.

### **Applied Theatre**

Applied theatre is a different term that bears a much closer resemblance to my definition of political theatre than Kirby's conception of the same words. In her paper "Applied Theatre: An Exclusionary Discourse?," Judith Ackroyd draws upon Nicholson's work to explain that applied theatre practitioners are driven by "individual or social change," so they are more preoccupied with the "effects and usefulness of the work" (4, 2007). That is, applied theatre is theatre for a purpose rather than art for art's sake. It could then be said that political theatre is a specific type of applied theatre.

In order to further explain applied theatre, Ackroyd uses Nicholson's comparison of applied theatre and applied mathematics, where she states that applied mathematics is "concerned with using theoretical models to solve practical problems" (4, 2007). While this comparison might suggest that applied theatre must present an actual solution to whatever problem it attempts to address, it would be more helpful to disregard the word 'solve' and focus on the rest of the sentiment. Applied theatre aims to use its theoretical storytelling for some



practical application. When extended to political theatre, this practical application is the intentional focus on a socio-political issue. Political theatre is focused on utilizing a ‘theoretical’<sup>8</sup> story to showcase those issues and inspire audiences to educate themselves and work toward finding answers and solutions to those problems. While I do not believe it is always the responsibility of political theatre to offer specific solutions (although some instances do), it is the goal of political theatre to showcase these problems in an authentic way that inspires solutions to be found.

### **Epic Theatre**

Bertolt Brecht was a major proponent of epic theatre as a philosophy of social commentary. He believed that in order to “expose [issues] one must first be able to depict the empirical realities of the present day” (Squiers 42, 2014). Brecht’s goal with epic theatre was to “create an intellectual climate for social change” (Wilson and Goldfarb 377, 2012). He utilized a technique known in German as ‘*verfremdungseffekt*,’ or ‘alienation effect,’ to keep the audience emotionally disengaged from the show so that they would pay attention to the underlying political message. For example, Brecht would not hide his lighting instruments, instead he wanted the audience to be aware that they were in a theatre watching a play and not get swept up into the world of the show.

Like my definition of political theatre, Brecht was focused on purposefully conveying a political message, and every aspect of his productions – from the scripts to the technical elements – was meant to support that. However, unlike my findings from my post-show talk-back, Brecht

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<sup>8</sup> The term ‘theoretical,’ in this case, is quoted because all political theatre is rooted in truth, but there are varying degrees depending on the story. Some use verbatim dialogue from interviews, some are based on true stories, and some are merely inspired by the issue without having direct ties to any individual person, event, or story. The term ‘theoretical’ should not be taken to mean untrue or made up, rather it is meant to indicate that theatre is always separated from reality by virtue of being a scripted performance.

believed that emotion was a hinderance to this goal. As I will discuss later in this paper, I believe the exact opposite. I have found that emotion is precisely what makes drama so effective at communicating political messages. By appealing to the emotional side of audiences, theatre is able to get them invested in the story, the characters, and therefore the subject matter. Because of this, Brecht's epic theatre would not be as successful as my view of political theatre in engaging audiences – namely because that is the exact opposite of his goal with *verfremdung*.

## NOTES ON THE CREATIVE PROJECT PROCESS

As a theatre and political science double major, the idea of doing a creative project related to political theatre was in my mind from the very beginning. At first, I was going to attempt to write my own play, but it became clear to me that in order to truly dissect the role theatre can play in shaping public opinion, I needed to use an established example written by professionals. Choosing *The Exonerated* was an easy next step. I directed and performed in a version of the show as my senior showcase in high school. I went to a visual and performing arts school in a diverse area, so doing a show that tackled racial issues was a natural culmination to my four years of education there. It was the experience that inspired me to double major with political science on top of my theatre degree.

*The Exonerated* tells the story of six wrongfully convicted people – Delbert Tibbs, Kerry Max Cook, Gary Gauger, David Keaton, Robert Earl Hayes and Sunny Jacobs – who were sentenced to death row and later exonerated. The show was written by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen who interviewed inmates and wrote the show directly from interviews and the public record. It is traditionally performed with minimal setting, props, or effects which made it a perfect choice for a reading. *The Exonerated* is written in such a way that places emphasis on the

words themselves. In order to honor that and ensure that nothing was missed, I decided to have a reading instead of doing a full off-book production. My actors sat on stools with their characters taking turns stepping into the spotlight to tell their stories. Having scripts in hand gave the actors the freedom to spend rehearsals really digging into the circumstances and working to understand the weight of the stories they were telling, rather than worrying about memorizing lines.

Before we even got to the rehearsal process, however, I had to make some tough decisions regarding the story itself. Doing a full scale reading of the entire script was not feasible for myself as a full-time student involved in other productions with the theatre department, nor was it realistic for me to find 10 students who would be able to commit to the project. Therefore, I chose to cut the script down to a 45 minute version including only four of the exonerees: Delbert Tibbs – the poetic ‘narrator’ of sorts; Kerry Max Cook – a white man accused of being a “homosexual maniacal murderer;”<sup>9</sup> Robert Earl Hayes – a black horse trainer who was not allowed to get his racing license back even after being exonerated; and Sunny Jacobs – the vegetarian hippy whose husband Jesse was brutally executed when the electric chair malfunctioned. It was an extremely hard process figuring out which stories to keep in and what could be cut. I did not want to lose any of the messages because this show has so much important information to share, but in the end, it had to be done.

I ended up keeping the stories of two black men, one white man, and one white woman. Race is a key issue in *The Exonerated*; a lot of the circumstances leading up to Tibbs’ and Hayes’ arrests were due to blatant racism and systemic injustice in our judicial systems. However, the show also makes the point that being wrongfully convicted can happen to anyone. Mistakes are made, corruption exists, and it ends up ruining the lives of all different types of

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<sup>9</sup> See page 22

people. That is why I wanted to showcase a wide array of stories in the shorter version that I put on for my post-show discussion.<sup>10</sup>

The post-show discussion was an integral part of weaving together my creative project and this written thesis. I wanted to use the staged reading as an example of political theatre and obtain audience feedback to find out what messages they received from the play and how the medium of a play impacted that reception. I anticipated that there would be a difference between what they got out of the experience of the staged reading as opposed to if I had given them a lecture on criminal justice reform. The following summary of my survey results will show that most audience members did view the experience differently because of its ability to connect to their emotions and portray the issues on a more personal and human level.

## **SUMMARY OF TALK-BACK AND SURVEY DATA**

Everyone who completed my survey after the staged reading of *The Exonerated* understood the subject matter of the play. The death penalty and failures of the justice system were the main responses regarding what issues are portrayed in *The Exonerated*. Other issues that were detected were racism, “homosexual violence in the prison systems,”<sup>11</sup> and rehabilitation of released inmates. This play is very obviously about those issues, so I was expecting it to be clear to the audience. What I was not sure about was whether they would agree with my premise that it is a show about political issues, but everyone indicated that the corruption in the judicial system that was exemplified in this play is a political issue. However, the reasoning behind viewing it as political was widely varied from respondent to respondent.

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<sup>10</sup> Also referred to in this paper as a “talk-back.”

<sup>11</sup> See survey results – question 1

Some focused on the systemic issues within the judicial branch of our government, and therefore considered it inherently political. Some viewed the racial issues and bias of individual police officers, lawyers, and jury members as a societal issue that is political because “there is an overlap between society and politics, such as issues of racism affecting politics and society.”<sup>12</sup>

When it came to questions about how theatre is unique in its ability to convey political messages, I began by asking about each audience member’s style of learning. 55.5% said they are more affected by emotions and stories, 27.7% chose logic and reasoning, and 16.6% of respondents claimed to need specific statistics and facts to influence their opinions.<sup>13</sup> The amazing thing about theatre is that it can appeal to all three, but what sets it apart is the emotional aspect. Whereas a report, newspaper article, or lecture can easily provide logic, facts, and data, the most effective way to appeal to someone’s emotions is by showing them a story delivered by real people. Even an anecdote delivered through a speech or the written word is still lacking compared to seeing the actual issue acted out or hearing someone speak in the first person about such an event. It is the difference between someone saying they heard about the cousin of a friend’s friend who went through something compared to “this actually happened to me.”

Finally, I asked my audience members directly if, after watching the example of political theatre that I had staged, they felt that there was anything special about theatre and its ability to convey political information. Although there was an array of reasons behind their answers, every single one of them replied in the affirmative. One of the main reasons supplied were the actors’ facial expressions and other emotions. One respondent wrote in the survey that “it is harder to

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<sup>12</sup> See survey results – question 2

<sup>13</sup> See survey results – question 9

ignore or dismiss bodies and voices – lived interactions – than a textual polemic.”<sup>14</sup> Another person wrote that storytelling like theatre “makes the issue more understandable and relatable and perhaps helps people think about the situation more sympathetically/seriously/urgently,”<sup>14</sup> as well as making the subject “personal [so] the audience develops attachment to the people,”<sup>14</sup> as another respondent put it. Another survey answer stated that “plays are a visual, immersive format that allow us to connect with issues we may not experience ourselves or cause us to view them in a different way because it forces us to consider perspectives other than our own. As such, it proves a unique and highly useful way of presenting social and political issues.”<sup>14</sup>

## CONCLUSION

From all the data I collected with my survey, I found that my instincts were supported. Audiences recognized an intentional, central political message in our staged reading of *The Exonerated*, therefore confirming it as a work of political theatre under my definition. They also felt that the play uniquely relayed that political message through the emotional appeal of hearing and seeing real people embodying a story. In fact, 94.4% of respondents to my survey said that they learned something from watching *The Exonerated*.<sup>15</sup> This paper has shown that political theatre can be used as a tool for social change. Changing the world begins with changing the minds of the people in it, toward which political theatre has the potential to be a powerful influence. Exposing audiences to meaningful issues is an important catalyst that needs to be utilized.

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<sup>14</sup> See survey results – question 8

<sup>15</sup> See survey results – question 7

Unlike Kirby's political theatre, Brecht's epic theatre, or the concept of applied theatre, the definition of political theatre that I have provided in this paper presents an achievable goal toward which the theatre community should be striving. Theatre's innate ability to create an emotional experience for the audience that aids in exposing them to stories and information about important socio-political topics is precisely why more effort needs to be put into creating these kinds of productions. As one respondent to my survey put it, "theatre is meant to inspire, inform, and guide people to self-actualization."<sup>16</sup> Being part of productions that work toward bringing out the best in our society, even if that means pointing out the worst, is an honor of which I will never tire. For that reason, I urge all artists and members of the theatre community to boldly charge toward political theatre and not shy away from issues that can seem daunting. It is said that theatre is meant to hold a mirror up to society, and that is precisely what I hope we will use political theatre to do.

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<sup>16</sup> See survey results – question 10

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# THE EXONERATED

BY JESSICA BLANK  
AND ERIK JENSEN

## CHARACTERS

DELBERT, African-American, 60, A seminary dropout, radical and poet. His whole personality is like an old soul song: smooth, mellow and with an underlying rhythm that never lets up. Actors playing Delbert should take care to find his substantial sense of humor, in addition to his obvious depth.

SUNNY, white, 50. A bright, pixie-ish yoga teacher from California; her lightness and positivity contrast with moments of great depth and clarity.

ROBERT, African-American, 30s. A former horse groomer from the deep South; hardened but not lacking a sense of humor. Deep rural Mississippi accent.

GEORGIA, African-American, 30s. Robert's wife, also Southern; opinionated, outspoken and extremely warm. She and Robert have a lovingly contentious relationship. Loves to speak her mind.

KERRY, white, 45. A 19-year-old trapped in a 45-year-old's body, born and bred in Texas. Kerry was imprisoned for 22 of his 45 years and is eager to rediscover the world. Always wants to make sure he connects with whomever he is talking to. Strong Texas accent.

SANDRA, white, 40. Sandra is married to Kerry. Sweet, nurturing, loves Kerry dearly and has a great sense of humor about him. She has a strong Texas accent.

Each actor will have several lines as other characters to help serve each other's stories.

# THE EXONERATED

DELBERT.

This is not the place for thought that does not end in concreteness;  
it is not easy to be open or too curious.  
It is dangerous to dwell too much on things:  
to wonder who or why or when, to wonder how, is dangerous.  
How do we, the people, get outta this hole, what's the way to fight,  
might I do what Richard and Ralph and Langston'n them did?  
It is not easy to be a poet here. Yet I sing.  
I sing.

ROBERT. Robert Earl Hayes. This here's my wife –

GEORGIA. Georgia Hayes.

ROBERT. Baby, they know your last name –

GEORGIA. I know, I just wanted to introduce myself. Go ahead.

ROBERT. Now, at the time that all this happened I was working  
around the racetrack, takin' care of the horses you know. And at that  
racetrack, this white girl, she gets raped and killed. And you know,  
she be dating the black guys –

GEORGIA. Mm-hmm.

ROBERT. – and when she got killed, they ask me have I ever had  
sex with the girl. I told them yeah, they said –

(SUNNY) WHITE COP. Well, were you having sex with her that  
night?

ROBERT. I said no. Then they said –

(SUNNY) WHITE COP. Well, why does she like hanging out on the  
black side of the track?

ROBERT. So I said, “I don't know why she like hanging out back  
there, I guess we more fun.”  
But this girl, she got killed. And the cop came to my job the next  
morning, they said –

(SUNNY) WHITE COP. We gotta talk to you.

ROBERT. I said okay, I went to the police station. And they kept  
saying –

(SUNNY) WHITE COP. We know what happened –  
We know you asked her for a date, and she hit you –  
– and you hit her back –  
– and you didn't *mean* to hit her that hard.

ROBERT. They just came right after me. This white girl, me and she  
had dated, and you know people 'round here don't like that too  
much.

GEORGIA. Mm-hmm.

ROBERT. And in my first trial I *knew* I was going to prison – I had  
eleven whites and one black on that jury.

GEORGIA. And do you think, seriously, now be honest, if the roles had been reversed, if it had been a black woman and a white man, it woulda been like that?

ROBERT. Right, 'cause let's go to another high-profile case.

GEORGIA. Oh, here we go –

ROBERT. Now within all y'all's hearts – now be honest – within your *heart*, do you really think O.J. committed that crime?

GEORGIA. Well, but O.J., you know, I'm black and I *still* think he's guilty, I'm sorry – I don't care what they say, if the DNA put you there, O.J., you guilty.

KERRY. Kerry Max Cook.

SANDRA. Sandra Cook.

KERRY. It actually started when I was in the ninth or tenth grade: Me and my friends would, you know, act like we were going to school and then run out the back door and start trying to find a car with the keys in it. And I had the misfortune that one of the cars that I stole, in my adventures to conquer the world, was the sheriff deputy's car and I, ah... wrecked it – driver's ed I didn't take – and, make a long story short, the deputy beat me for it.

And that was pretty much it – after that, any robbery, any broken window, any cat up a tree, everything was just *my fault*, as far as the sheriff was concerned

And then fast forwarding, I'm nineteen, and I'm at this apartment complex in Texas called the Embarcadero – there's a swimming pool there, it's where all the hip people hang out. And I was an attractive guy, I dressed real nice. It was the seventies you know, man: I bought my clothes from the hippest place, like the Gap, and I had my hair styled real long, platform shoes and bell-bottoms. I looked tight.

And I was walkin' towards the swimming pool, and there was this beautiful gorgeous girl, man. (*To Sandra*) Not as pretty as you.

SANDRA. Go on.

KERRY. But really *gorgeous*, man – just nude and fondling herself, right there in the window. So I look up and I go, "Oh my god, man... wow," 'cause I had lived a very sheltered, naïve life, I'd never even been to a strip club before, and I'm seeing this total complete mature woman, and I'm goin' "okay, yeah, that's cool, man."

And so anyway, a couple days go by, and I'm back at the pool and there's this chick, layin' out there. To make a long story short, we started talking, told her I was a bartender in Dallas – 'course I was working at a gay bar, but I didn't tell her that – I'm just stretching everything as much as I can because I want to be all that plus a bag of potater chips. Anyway, we end up going back to her apartment... we... uh... you know... made out.

SANDRA. But not – all the way.

KERRY. Oh, no, no, no. I was in there for about maybe thirty, forty-five minutes, whatever, and I got cold feet because she was so aggressive, and I left.

And I didn't ever see or hear from her ever again until I'm arrested for her murder three months later, August of 1977.

(DELBERT) DEFENSE. Since June 10, 1977, Tyler, Texas, has been screaming and crying for *someone* to answer to this crime –

KERRY. They had found a fingerprint of mine on her doorframe.

SANDRA. And they had a fingerprint guy whose knowledge of fingerprints at that point was a six-month correspondence school –

(ROBERT) PROSECUTION. Lieutenant Doug Collins is an expert fingerprint technologist. He will testify that he found a fingerprint

belonging to the defendant, Kerry Max Cook. It is as clear, Ladies and Gentlemen, as the day when you put your footprint on your birth certificate. That officer didn't have any reason to lie. He will narrow the time element of the leaving of those fingerprints –

(DELBERT) DEFENSE. Objection, your Honor.

KERRY. You *can't* date a fingerprint, it's scientifically impossible.

(SUNNY) JUDGE. Your motion is overruled.

KERRY. That judge let them say, all through my trial, that I left that fingerprint there at the time of her murder.

And this next part has been hidden for twenty years: Linda, the victim, had been having an affair with this guy Whitfield, a professor of sciences over at the University, and *everyone* had just found out about it, he was fired from his job, lost his wife, lost his kids, whole big mess. And her roommate, Darla, had seen somebody in the apartment the night of the murder, who she said had silver hair, medium-short, touching-the-ears fashion, wearing white tennis shorts. Just like Whitfield.

In her police report, Darla says she sees this guy Whitfield in the apartment that night and says –

(GEORGIA) DARLA. Don't worry, it's only me.

KERRY. – and goes to bed. But at the trial she turns around says –

(GEORGIA) DARLA. (*Pointing.*) That's the man right there.

KERRY. – and points at me. And my lawyer didn't even argue with that. My attorney was the former D.A. who jailed me twice before. He was paid 500 dollars, and in Texas, you get what you pay for.

SUNNY. Sunny Jacobs. In 1976, I was sentenced to death row, which for me wasn't a row at all because I was the only woman in

the country who had the sentence of death. So *I* suggested they put me in the same cell as my husband!

But let me start at the beginning.

When I was twenty-six, Jesse and I had been together for three years. We weren't officially married, but I considered him my husband, you know. Our daughter had just been born, and Jesse said he was gonna get himself a regular job, maybe painting murals or something, but he just needed to go to Florida one last time to do a little deal.

Now, I didn't want to know about this deal, because I knew it wasn't positive; it wasn't violent, but it wasn't positive. And finally he calls and says that the deal fell through, and not only is he broke and has no way home, but he's staying with some *girl*! So, of course, me, instead of saying, "well, when you get it together, me and the kids will be here waiting for you," I said, "I'll be right there to getcha!" My son Eric was nine, and I was driving, shifting, singing and nursing Tina all at the same time. It was like driving through the ten plagues, you know, the first being the oil leaking all over the road, and the final one – you know those love bugs that smash themselves on your window?

So anyway, we get there, get Jesse, the car dies, and we're all stuck in Florida. And so Jesse says he'll ask this guy he knows if we can stay with him until we can scrape the money together to get home. And that's when I met Walter Rhodes.

So we're all stuck in Florida, staying at Walter Rhodes' apartment. And it was a real sleazebag place; I mean he was obviously doing illegal activities.

And it was so weird – my son Eric woke up screaming in the middle of the night. He had this nightmare that something terrible was going to happen to us. And it did.

DELBERT.

It's not easy  
to feel good in winter winds  
when ice is everywhere  
and you just wanna sing...

Copyright 1997, Delbert Tibbs... I'm Delbert Tibbs.

I'm a child of the sixties and the seventies, right? So, much of the philosophy that people were motivated by during those times I was, and continue to be, motivated by. I have an ongoing – an *abiding* interest in things philosophical and/or metaphysical; I won't say religious...

And so, you know, in 1972, I went to seminary for a year and a half, but the racism there was so pervasive you could cut it with a knife. So I decided that the seminary wasn't gonna take me where I wanted to go, so I dropped out, and started roaming America. We called it *tunin' in*. Tune in, turn on, an' drop out. And I haven't turned off for a long time.

So that's where I was at – and I happened to be in Florida when some crazy stuff happened, a guy was killed, a young woman was raped, and I happened to be in Florida.

And I knew that some folks were gonna say –

(SUNNY) SOUTHERNER. Now what's this nigga doin here, and who is he, an' why is he here?!

DELBERT. – and so forth, but my attitude was fuck that, you know? I'm an American citizen, and I've served in the Armed Forces of the United States, and all that kinda shit.

The point I'm trying to make is that, in my mind I decided that I was gonna be free in terms a my movements. That I was gonna go wherever I wanted to go, in these United States, an' whatever came out of that, if there was trouble, then I would deal with it when it came. And sure enough... sure enough, trouble came.

Because this *crime* had occurred, and I was on the highway in Florida, so I was stopped and questioned, and the captain wrote me out a note sayin' –

(SANDRA) WHITE COP 1. This person was stopped by me on this date and I'm satisfied that he's not the person wanted in connection with the crimes that occurred in southern Florida.

DELBERT. Now, initially, the girl who survived the thing described the murderer as a black man about five six, very dark complexion, with pockmarked skin and a bush Afro. Now that don't fit me no matter how you draw it – except racially. That's the only thing we had in common: We're both black men.

But now it's like two weeks or something after the crime has occurred, and they gotta find *somebody*, cause the small town is in hysterics, you know? There's a nigger running around killing white men and raping white women, and you can't have that.

Understandable.

So anyway, the cops stopped me again, and I said no, I'm not. I said I was stopped in Florida –

(SANDRA) WHITE COP 1. This person was stopped by me on this date and –

DELBERT. – and to the satisfaction of the Florida Highway Patrol, I'm not the person that you're looking for. He says, in effect:

(KERRY) WHITE COP 2. Bullshit.

DELBERT. He says –

(KERRY) WHITE COP 2. You're Delbert Tibbs, I have a warrant for your arrest.

DELBERT. And they arrested me in Mississippi.

ROBERT. – I mean, I might as well be wearin' a sign that says, "arrest me, I'm black."

GEORGIA. It's always somethin'. I mean it's not all police officers, it's not all white people, but it's those few that make the rest of them look so bad –

ROBERT. I think if anyone have anything against anyone in this country, it should have been the Indians. But I do think now, these days, it's a lot better, especially in Mississippi because if it wasn't, I'd be sittin' here saying, "yes ma'am, Miss Daisy." Maybe it's goin' away –

GEORGIA. But Robert – Okay, in my opinion, you never gonna get rid of it. My father taught me, things are passed down from generation to generation, and if the older generation teach the younger generation, then it ain't never gonna go away.

DELBERT.  
No time in this world to talk about dreams,  
no space to place words in some lovely configuration;  
deliberation is not the method  
for passage through these woods  
cold, tired  
if you dream in this world  
it is dangerous

SUNNY. My son Eric couldn't sleep because of the nightmare, and I just couldn't stay with Rhodes another night. So finally Rhodes agreed to give me, Jesse and the kids a ride.  
And we left, but the traffic got bad and it was getting late, so the decision was made to pull off the road until morning. And according to the police reports, the cops came to do a routine check on the rest area. And when they look in the window, they see a gun between Rhodes' feet. They order him out of the car and ask for his ID. The policeman calls in the ID information, and then tells Rhodes:

(ROBERT) BLACK COP. Stand over there, I'm finished with you.

SUNNY. And then they ask my husband Jesse to get out.  
And then the police radio comes back with the announcement that Rhodes is on parole – and possession of a gun is a parole violation. And that changed everything. The policeman drew his gun. He said –

(ROBERT) BLACK COP. Okay, the next one to move is dead.

SUNNY. It all happened so fast, you know. I just ducked down to cover the kids. (*Four loud gunshots.*) And then it was silence. I mean *dead silence*. There wasn't an earthly sound.  
And then Rhodes runs around the front of the police car with a gun in his hand, and he's saying –

(DELBERT) RHODES. Come on, we're gonna take the police car!

SUNNY. I mean, Rhodes had just killed two policemen, had a gun and was telling us to get in the police car. And, you know, people say, "Why didn't you just refuse to go?" And I think, you've never been at the other end of a gun, have you?  
So we get in the police car. We couldn't speak. (*Cars honking/helicopters.*) We were kidnapped at that point, and we just didn't dare.

But then all of a sudden, the traffic gets terrible, and you can hear the helicopters, and I know there must be a roadblock. "Hey, we're gonna be *rescued!* Help is on the way, you know, the cavalry!"  
And out of nowhere Rhodes makes a sharp left to try and avoid the roadblock – (*Heavy gunfire.*) – and this whole line of policemen opens fire on the car. The car was literally bouncing with all the bullets. So again I cover the kids. And finally we crash. (*Crash/sirens.*) And a bunch of cops surround us, and I'm trying to explain that we were kidnapped, but they just wouldn't listen.

(SANDRA) WHITE COP. Are you aware of the fact that you have been charged and arrested on First Degree Murder?

DELBERT. Well, yeah, man, it definitely has an effect on you for people to lock you up: First of all, it shows you they have the power to do it, and then they tell you they're gonna kill you, you know, and you're inclined to believe them. (*Chuckles.*) So it definitely messes with your sense of personal power, you know what I'm saying?

SUNNY. So I actually did at first try to lie, and I told the cops I didn't know these people, I was just a hitchhiker. Stupid. Because of course they think you're lying because you did something. But I was just scared.

And what I didn't know, was at the same moment I was being questioned and Jesse was being questioned, was that Rhodes, from his hospital bed, was negotiating a deal. He'd been in prison before, he knew how the system worked. And so he was claiming that he didn't do it – we did.

DELBERT. So I'm sitting there in Mississippi. After a couple days of being locked up, I decided I would waive extradition. Now this was because of my spiritual growth. A friend of mine has something he calls his "nigger radar," right, which sort of alerts him when, as he quotes Darth Vader, when there's a "disturbance in the force." But I'm operating on another thing, you know, 'cause a lotta the *tension* I had felt regarding race had sorta been washed away. I had achieved some sort of spiritual... plateau, if you will, by living out on the road.

I wasn't expecting any problems. I had been befriended by all kinda people – mostly white folks, 'cause there weren't no black folks around. I hitchhiked across Texas, which is as big as Russia, you know what I'm sayin'? And I got *one* ride from a brother.

Anyway, I waived extradition to Florida, meaning I voluntarily went back. If I hadn't done that, I don't think I would've ever gone to death row, 'cause the state of Florida really didn't have a case. Nobody had seen me there, there was no connection between me and the place where the crime occurred, fingerprints, none'a that – 'cause I wasn't there.

And in Florida, as in most places, the jury is chosen from the voting records – and this is 1974, black people had only had the right to vote since 1965, and this is a backwater town where it's run sorta like a plantation and the folks in charge are the folks in charge, right?

And as I sometimes tell people, if you're accused of a sex crime in the South and you're black – you probably shoulda done it, you know, 'cause your ass is gonna be guilty. And they found me guilty.

KERRY. So they had a lead that the victim's boyfriend, Professor Whitfield, had done the murder. But they didn't go after him, they went after me. They said the crime was done by a homosexual maniacal murderer who hated women. The prosecution accused me of bein' a homosexual – before the jury –

(GEORGIA) PROSECUTION. A young woman lies in her grave not far from this courtroom, butchered, because of Kerry Max Cook's warped homosexual lust for blood and perversion –

(SANDRA) DEFENSE. Objection, Your Honor. The defendant's alleged homosexuality has nothing to do with the allegations in the murder indictment.

(ROBERT) JUDGE. *Overruled*. Proceed, Counsel.

(GEORGIA) PROSECUTION. Thank you, Your Honor. Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury. I would be remiss in my duty if I did not show you every last grotesque detail because the killer sits right before you in this courtroom and it is time for twelve good people from this county to put that man on the scrap heap of humanity where he belongs. He has a warped perversion and he will not reason with you. The victim was a young woman just beginning to realize her dreams and he butchered her body. This is the kind of sick perversion that turns Kerry Max Cook on.

You people have no right to even submit prison guards to the kind of risk that man poses. Think about it. Do you want to give this pervert his butcher knife back? Now, we must look upon it as putting a sick animal to sleep. Kerry Max Cook has forfeited his right to walk among us. He no longer has rights.

So let's let all the freaks and perverts and murderous homosexuals of the world know what we do with them in a court of justice. That we take their lives.

SUNNY. My husband Jesse was tried first, and he had a past record, from when he was seventeen years old, and his trial lasted four days. We both had, of course, no good attorneys, no dream team, no expert witnesses, and so he was convicted, and sentenced to death. My trial came later. I thought, surely that won't happen to *me*, I mean, I was a hippie, I'm one of those peace and love people, I'm a *vegetarian*! How could you possibly think I would kill someone? And so I thought I'd go in, they'd figure out I didn't kill anyone, and they'd let it go. But that's not how it works. There was prosecutorial misconduct, there was hiding of evidence that would have proven I didn't do it; the jury wasn't even allowed to know that Rhodes accepted a plea bargain of three life sentences in exchange for his testimony! Now, I don't think three life sentences is a bargain. Nobody *I* know would think it's a bargain...

And I didn't have any investigators, I didn't have any expert witnesses, I didn't have thousands of dollars. My parents said, "Well, you know, we were told we could try and get you a better lawyer, but you *have* a lawyer, they've *appointed* you one, so it's okay." We didn't know.

They tell you exactly how they're gonna do it. They're gonna send 2,200 volts of electricity through your body until you're dead. And then they ask you if you have anything to say to that, and really it's kind of dumbfounding. So after the judge read the sentence, I just said, "Are you finished?" I didn't have anything to say. What do you say? How can you say anything to that?

DELBERT. I don't remember any of my dreams from when I was on death row. I almost never recall my dreams, which I am absolutely fascinated by.

When I was at the University of Chicago, I took part in a laboratory experiment. They were running a test to see if creative people's

dreams differ from those who are less creative. And so of course, it appealed to the ego in me, thinking somebody thought I was creative. So you go to bed in the lab and they are monitoring your respiration and your REM and so forth. And they would wake me up over the microphone and it always sounded to me like one of the Nazi doctors 'cause he had an accent, you know, he would be like, "MISTA TIBBS, YOU VERE DREAMINK." And I wanted to say, "No shit." But the fascinating thing was, when the motherfuckers hooked me up – they put the receptors by your ears, right exactly at the same place they do when they're getting ready to execute your ass.

SUNNY. Instead of sending me to be Jesse's cellmate, they decided to clear out an entire disciplinary unit at the women's prison. It's a very old prison, it's like a dungeon-type place. It was six steps from the door to the toilet bowl – you could stretch out your arms and touch both walls. They take your clothes, they give you a number, so basically they're taking – who you *are* from you. You no longer have a name, you're a number, you're locked inside this *tomb*. It's like you're thrown to the bottom of the well.

KERRY. You know, when I was in there, I saw 141 guys go down. All's I got to do is pick up the newspaper, turn on the news, "such and such becomes the two-hundred-twenty-second inmate executed resulting from capital punishment," – and I hear the name and I say, "oh my God," 'cause I know him, I mean, I don't just *know* him, I *ate* with him, I *cried* with him, we used to play basketball and talk about, "man, you're gonna go free."

You know, I got a book, a book about Texas death row, and seriously, this book is what, five years old, and everyone in here has been executed. I can go through that book, one by one, and point out every face in here that's gone.

And you know, at a capital trial, the prosecutors always say, "He's dangerous, he's a maniac, the sick, twisted murderer." But I'm no different from you – I mean, I wasn't a street thug, I wasn't trash, I came from a good family – if it happened to me, man, it can happen to anyone.



ROBERT. The electric chair was downstairs and I was upstairs, and every Wednesday morning they cranked that electric chair up and you could hear it buzz.

And when they served breakfast, you gotta have sharp ears to hear that front door open, 'cause if you oversleep, the roaches and the rats come and eat your breakfast, and that's the God's honest truth. And the guards – I think nine times out of ten, the average person that became a guard, the only way I can see it, when he grew up he was a little runt and then the bigger guy would mess with him and all of that. And then they grow up and they wanna do that too.

KERRY. So, uh, they accused me of bein' a homosexual, and that got into the media that got to death row even before I got there, so in prison, uh, uh – I was uh, uh – I had three guys pull a train on me... and they raped me, and sodomized me, and they carved "good p-u-s-s-y" on my behind. And it's there all over my body, its cut so deep I can't, plastic surgery won't remove it, it's not a tattoo, and I attempted suicide a couple times with this whole little war I was fighting: On the one side, the criminal justice system, and then on the Western front I'm fighting with fear of my life with these inmates every day.

DELBERT. Needless to say, Job is one of my favorite Biblical figures. I don't know if I have the patience of Job – but I hope I have his faith. Even if you got a teeny weeny bit it's big. The shit is hard to come by, you know what I'm sayin'? But faith or not, I realized a long time ago, if I internalized all the anger, and all the pain, and all the hurt, I'd be dead already – they wouldn't even have to execute me.

SUNNY. I had fifteen years' worth of letters between me and Jesse. I saved not only the letters, but the envelopes, because anything that he touched, or that he wrote on, or that he licked with his tongue, I was keeping. I didn't even read his letters when I first got them; I would carry 'em around with me for a while. Just to hold it. I'd see if

he put the stamp on right side up or upside down. That was part of his message too.

And then I'd open it and I wouldn't read it for content; I would just look at it to see: Did he look like he was happy when he wrote it, or sad? Did the writing slant upward or downward? Oh it's big round open letters; he must have been having a good day. Oh it's very tight writing, I can see he must have been having some problems. I would just savor the whole thing, and *then* I'd read it.

We carried on a fairly full life in our letters, actually, including our sex life. Oh yeah. You know, you have to send your letters out unsealed so that they can read them to see that there's no escape plans or whatever. So we got ourselves little Japanese dictionaries, and we used the Japanese language for our lovemaking, because we wanted to have some privacy.

And so we had this life, you know; this little world together. I existed on those letters.

First I had to decide: "This is bullshit, I am not going to let them do this to me." 'Cause if you sit there, rubbing two sticks together and crying on your sticks, they're never gonna make a spark. But, you know, if you stop feeling sorry for yourself, just because you're determined not to believe in hopelessness, then a spark happens, and then you just keep fanning that little spark until you got a flame. And I realized that it was like a big trick. That I wasn't just a little lump of flesh that they could put in a cage. And I decided that I would have faith, that there was some power out there greater than them, to which I could make my appeal.

Now, you people that don't believe, you could say I was like Dumbo and I put this feather in my nose and I flew because I could fly anyway.

Or you could say that there is really something out there and that if we have faith in it and we appeal to it, it will answer us – and maybe we're both right. I don't know.

ROBERT. Well, see, before I went to prison, I had a dream about prison – and I seen death row, I seen the inside, and I seen myself get out. And 'cause a that dream, I always said, I'm gonna get a new

trial. And sure enough, one day, I get awakened by all this commotion. All the inmates, they get up in the vents, hollerin' –

ALL. Man, you got a new trial! Damn, Robert, you gonna go free! You on the radio! Turn on the radio! Put the radio on!

ROBERT. Well, I put the radio on.  
And later that day, my lawyer came, and she said to me –

(SANDRA) LAWYER. Now, you know, Robert, if you lose, you can go back to death row.

ROBERT. And I said – “Well, now, accordin' to that dream, I'm gonna go free.”  
And she said –

(SANDRA) LAWYER. You gonna put all your trust in a dream?

ROBERT. And I said, “yep.”  
My lawyer had found a record that said that in the girl's hand when she died was some white people hair, red hair, sixteen inches long. So they said –

(DELBERT) PROSECUTION. When you were strangling this girl, she reached up and pulled her own hair!

ROBERT. Hold on. Now when someone come up behind you and they strangle you, are you gonna pull your own hair? Or are you gonna pull the hair of whoever back there behind you?

GEORGIA. Okay?!

ROBERT. (*To Prosecution:*) You can have a seat. (*To audience:*) And we all knew this white guy, her ex-boyfriend. He had been asking the girl for a date, telling her –

(KERRY) EX-BOYFRIEND. Why you keep hanging out with all them blacks?

ROBERT. And he asked her that *same night* –

(KERRY) EX-BOYFRIEND. We gonna go out?

ROBERT. And she said, “We ain't.”  
And so my lawyer, she found out the cops had that hair, she found the guy. He got up and testified at my appeal.  
So my lawyer ask him –

(SANDRA) LAWYER. Back in 1990, what color was your hair, and how long was it?

ROBERT. And by then he had short hair, salt and pepper, you know, and he said –

(KERRY) EX-BOYFRIEND. My hair was the same color and length back then as it is now.

ROBERT. And my lawyer said –

(SANDRA) LAWYER. Are you sure?

(KERRY) EX-BOYFRIEND. Of course I'm sure.

ROBERT. So my lawyer pulls out this envelope. And she said –

(SANDRA) LAWYER. Again in 1990, do you remember having your picture taken near the racetrack?

(KERRY) EX-BOYFRIEND. Uh, yeah.

ROBERT. And then she pulled that big ol' photograph picture out and showed it to him. And there he was, his hair red and brown and sixteen inches long on the picture.

ROBERT and GEORGIA. Okay?!

KERRY. So then after I've been on death row for twenty-two years, they find this DNA evidence, you know, and the prosecution says that this will be the final nail in Kerry Max Cook's coffin: "We'll show the world once and for all that he committed that murder." And then the results come in and it did just the opposite, it finally took the nail out of my coffin, told the world the truth – that that was Professor Whitfield's DNA they found on that girl. And he's still out. They never even went after him. He's been walking around a free man, laughing at the system for twenty-two years. Twenty-two years.

SUNNY. In 1979, Walter Rhodes wrote the following letter to a judge.

(GEORGIA) RHODES. I, Walter Norman Rhodes, hereby depose and say that I am under no duress nor coercion to execute this affidavit. This statement is made freely and voluntarily, and to purge myself before my Creator.

Briefly. On February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1976, at approximately seven-fifteen a.m., I did, in fact, shoot to death two law enforcement officers with a nine millimeter Browning pistol.

I state emphatically and unequivocally that my previous testimony against Jesse Tafero and Sonia Jacobs was *false* and part of the statements I was instructed to make by the assistant state attorney, who did coerce me into lying.

I took a polygraph examination relative to this case, but owing to the fact that I am a student of Yoga and Karaté, and have been for the last ten years, I passed it. And can pass any such test, in my opinion. The foregoing statements are true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief. I so swear.

Walter Norman Rhodes, Jr., 9 November 1979.

SUNNY. Keep in mind that I wasn't released until 1992.

So I'll just give you a moment to reflect: From 1976 to 1992, just remove that entire chunk from your life, and that's what happened. But after all that, one day, the guard came into my cell and told me I was getting out, I thought he was trying to trick me. And it was just so *joyous*. I mean, I know a lot of people are angry, and I was angry some, but I didn't want to waste my time being mad.

At first I did everything that Jesse and I said we were going to do together. I went to New York City, I went to the bookstore we said we were going to go to, I bought the book we said we were going to buy to make our Japanese gardens. I was doing it all for both of us.

DELBERT. When I first got out, I was numb. I didn't sleep for the first three days. I couldn't. And on death row, I had slept like a baby every night.

My first day home, they threw a party at my brother's house. My brother. He gave me his bed for the night, you know with a red velvet coverlet on it and everything. And one of the sisters from the Defense Committee – she spent the night with me – which was nice, you know.

But I just couldn't get the fuck to sleep, man, and I guess around the third night I began hallucinating, and one of my friends said, let me call my Pastor and ask him to pray for you. And I talked to the Pastor, and he said some kind of prayer and I laid down and went straight to sleep. I haven't had any problems sleeping since then. After that, the main adjustment was just learning to feel again. You know, when you're in prison, you can't allow yourself to feel too much. So when you get out, you've gotta practice. I had to practice a bunch to be human again. To remind me.

SANDRA. Actually I am not a bleeding heart liberal at all, as a matter of fact I had a family member murdered and I was always a believer in the death penalty –

KERRY. She's a scientist –

SANDRA. But I was on the board of directors at the Dallas Peace Center and a guy from Amnesty approached me one day and told me he wanted me to help Kerry get integrated into society.

So we were supposed to meet at this conference, and this *boy* walks in, I mean, he had on some jeans and any piece of clothing that had a zipper – you know, from the seventies – it had to have a zipper or he didn't want it, he had grown his hair out and he dyed it – because, you know, he's really nineteen at heart... he couldn't look at anyone, he looked down, his leg was shaking the whole time.

KERRY. Especially with a female, man, I was super traumatized about that. Very shy.

SANDRA. He got up and used the bathroom probably about twenty times because he was so nervous –

KERRY. Aw, man, don't tell 'em that –

SANDRA. But then I thought – and I'm ashamed to have had this thought – what did he do to get himself in that situation? That's how I looked at it... 'cause you know, I was very conservative – and also very stupid. But he gave me the evidence, the hardcore evidence, and it dawned on me, oh my God, how could this have happened?

KERRY. The state of Texas executed me over a thousand times, man, and it just keeps on doin' it. I get nightmares – sometimes I forget I'm really here. And every day when I get in the shower I'm reminded of it, 'cause I cannot avoid the scars all over my body. This is the only woman I've been with since I've been free, 'cause of that, and I married her. Think I'm gonna keep her.  
But I'll be honest with you: The price of being here, alive, in this room, is really extraordinary – because when I'm alone, man, especially at night – Talk about a mental trip, huh?

ROBERT. I been out now, three and a half years goin' on four. And we got married, what?

GEORGIA. Two years, 'bout two years –

ROBERT. And she be wanting me to come home, you know at night, and I don't want to come home, I wanna stay out, you know, 'cause if I come home – (*Joking.*) – it makes me feel like I *still locked up*. (*Georgia responds.*) And you know, there's a lotta times when she go to the store, and she had to knock on the door to let me know she coming in.

GEORGIA. Yeah, he jumps! When I first moved in, I just be walking in, walking out, and he just jump up, 'cause he's just in that mode! I'm like, okay, he has to take a minute to calm down 'cause he's just used to that. You know, stuff like that plays with your mind.

ROBERT. Yeah, I was in there seven and a half years and it ain't ever gonna go away, far as I'm concerned. Lost my relaxation. Lotta other things too. You know, you can't really put your thoughts on what you could have lost, or what you *have* lost. I said I could have been a millionaire, or I could have been the Police Chief. I could have been one of the famous black horse trainers –

GEORGIA. And they won't even give him his license back.

ROBERT. The Trotting Association, they wouldn't even give me my racing license back.

GEORGIA. Can you believe that?

ROBERT. I went to the County, I passed my test with flying colors. They asked me have I ever been convicted of a crime. I put down on the application no, because the Supreme Court, they overturned it. Well, they wrote me back and told me I lied.

GEORGIA. Tell ‘em what you told your cousin.

ROBERT. So I told my cousin, I said, well watch. I can go to a gun shop around here, I’m gonna see if they’re gonna deny me. I went and got the gun. But the racing commission wouldn’t give me my license back. I can legally get a gun, but I can’t get a license to drive a horse.

GEORGIA. He can’t do something he *likes* to do.

ROBERT. Can’t do something I like to do.  
And you know, all I want is, I would like to have me this woman here, a nice piece of land in the country, a nice barn, tractor and a couple of horses. I don’t ask for much. But they sayin’ I can’t. Because of their mistake.

SUNNY. You see, I got another chance, because I looked for it. I looked to turn a pile of manure into flowers. I didn’t even get lemons, I got manure.

I mean, I’m not glad for what happened to me – when I was in there my parents died, my children grew up without a family... and my husband was executed – very, very brutally. Jesse’s execution was known worldwide. The chair malfunctioned and made a mess of it. And – they had to pull the switch three times.

And he didn’t die. It took *thirteen and a half* minutes for Jesse to die. Three jolts of electricity that lasted fifty-five seconds each. Almost a minute. *Each*. Until finally flames shot out from his head, and smoke came from his ears, and the people that came to see the execution, on behalf of the press, are still writing about it. *Ten years afterwards*. Why do we do that?

DELBERT. Mahatma Gandhi said that once he discovered who God was, all fears left him regarding the rest of the world, you know, and it’s *true*, you know. If you’re not harboring any kind of malice, any kind of stuff like that in your heart, there really ain’t too much to be afraid of.

And I understand why people are afraid, I mean, I do think the world itself, if you think about it, can be quite frightening – I mean just like getting up every day, you know, I understand.

But you can’t give in to that. ‘Cause as they say in the cowboy pictures, nobody’s gonna live forever, you know what I’m sayin’? And if you have to go, then you might as well go being about the highest thing that you can be about. And that means learning not to fear other people, man, on a *human* level, white or black or *whatever*.

I mean, it’s a real struggle not to lump all white people – you know, if you’re locked up in a room and a guy comes in wearin’ a gray suit and he hits you every time he walks into the room, afterwards you gonna have a thing about people with gray suits, I don’t give a fuck who they are.

But I try not to look at the world monolithically like that, and that’s what has helped me to survive. I mean, I think the American criminal justice system is totally fucked up – I think some things about our *country* are fucked up – but I also think it’s a great country, you know, I really do.

But I mean, the fact that you can have people who probably knew that a lotta folks were innocent – but *they* were not gonna be the ones to lose their jobs, jeopardize their kids’ college education, blow their new S.U.V. or whatever, for some abstraction like justice. That’s fucked up.

And I know America gets tired of all of these people talking about what they don’t have and what’s wrong with the country. Folks say “well what’s right with the country?” Well, what the fuck? To make things *better*, we ain’t interested in what’s *right* with it, we’re interested in what’s *wrong* with it. You don’t say “what’s *right* with my car?” What’s *wrong* with it is what we better deal with.

SUNNY. I want to be a living memorial. When I die I want ‘em to plant tomatoes on me, or apple trees or something, so that I can still be part of things. And while I’m still alive, I’m planting my seeds everywhere I go, so that they’ll say, “I once heard this woman, and she didn’t let them stop her, and she didn’t get crushed, and if that

little woman person can do it, then I can do it.” And *that’s* my revenge. That’s my legacy, and my memorial.

You know, I’ve never been to Jesse’s grave, and for a long time it was a bone of contention between his mother and me. But I explained to her, I said that grave is not where Jesse really is. I said, that grave is your monument, and this is mine. My life is my monument.

DELBERT.

This  
is the place for thoughts that do not end in concreteness.  
It is necessary to be curious  
and dangerous to dwell here, to wonder why  
and how and when is dangerous –  
but *that’s* how we get out of this hole.  
It is not easy to be a poet here.  
Yet I sing.

ALL.

We sing.

**END OF PLAY**

# SURVEY RESULTS

## Question 1

What subjects did you feel were touched on in the play The Exonerated?

Justice, Race, Honesty, Assumptions of guilt. Laziness of some law enforcement,

1 response

Issues in the Criminal Justice System, false conviction

1 response

Race and a flawed judicial system

1 response

Capital punishment, racism within the system, injustice within courts

1 response

Judicial system

1 response

Criminal reform justice, racial injustice, homosexual violence in the prison systems

1 response

Rape, Race Relations, and corruption in the criminal justice system

1 response

Corruption and injustice in the prison system

1 response

Death Row, injustice within the justice system, love, rehabilitation, prison life, rape, racial issues

1 response

Racism, Injustice, and Will

1 response

Wrongful imprisonment, broken justice system, rape, discrimination

1 response

Complications in the trial process for death sentences.

1 response

Wrongful conviction

1 response

Rape, prison system, justice

1 response

Incarceration, capital punishment, racism

1 response

Racism, corruption in the legal system, bias in the legal system, the morality of death penalty and it's methods, criminal justice reform

1 response

Racism, prejudice, justice system failures, police brutality

1 response

The US criminal justice system and instances where it fails; the factors that go into whether or not someone gets accused and convicted of a crime; the effects of false charges/convictions

1 response

## Question 2

Do you consider there to be a difference between social issues and political issues? i.e. are all (or some) social issues part of the sphere of politics or is politics separate from societal phenomena?

Social issues and political issues can overlap, such as the effect of race/ethnicity/identity and lifestyle choices on one's power/treatment within the justice system. Most or all political issues relate to social phenomena, but social issues (especially trivial ones) aren't necessarily political

1 response

As politics governs and reflects society, to me there is no world in which social issues and political issues are not intertwined. Politics can change society and vice versa, so it absolutely should address social issues

1 response

Politics is connected to the social because the political realm is in the public, where all social interactions happen. They are connected because they serve the same needs.

1 response

Politics are guided by society so there can be some separation however many political matters are influenced by social constructions

1 response

I think politics encapsulates societal issues. Political issues are based on morality determined by the current society.

1 response

i think there is an overlap between society and politics, such as issues of racism affecting politics and society

1 response

Yes, I believe there are differences. But there is a tendency to MAKE societal phenomena political.

1 response

Social issues ARE political issues in my opinion, however not all of politics are social issues.

1 response

I think there is a venn diagram where some issues are separate but some fall under both

1 response

I think to the extent that political action affects public society would be the overlap

1 response

I feel that at a certain point they blend together and become one and the same

1 response

I believe that they are different but can definitely influence one another.

1 response

I think there are some similarities but that they are different in context.

1 response

I believe that many social issues stem from the sphere of politics.

1 response

I think politics can be separate from social issues

1 response

Social and political issues are intertwined

1 response

The same

1 response

Yes

1 response

Question 3

Which, if any, of the subjects you noticed in The Exonerated would you consider political? Why?

I think the corruption and injustice that pervades the prison system would be both political and social. There are certain negative stereotype and such that infected society and that infection feeds into how we handle politics.

1 response

The injustice within the system, and racial issues in court were both political issues within the play in a sense that a major political system failed some innocent people based off of societal views.

1 response

All of them. If it's something we can vote on to make a change, if it has to do with those working for and with our government and criminal justice system, it's political.

1 response

The disparity in the trials of white and black defendants was evident. America has historically had a rough past dealing with race and it carried through into trials.

1 response

Corruption in the criminal justice system because it relates directly to how political wrongdoing sustains this ongoing corruption

1 response

All subjects mentioned above could be considered political due to the laws put in place that influenced the outcome of all stories

1 response

The criminal justice system because it touched on the political state of our nation's court system and how broken it is.

1 response

The idea of being falsely accused and unable to prove the truth (withheld info/evidence) etc

1 response

Political... the quick-to-judgement that makes it easier to justify incorrect assumptions.

1 response

Race in the criminal justice system; other potential flaws in the criminal justice system

1 response

All of them. Because they have ramifications for public policy as well as ethical life

1 response

The "wrongful conviction" because one was afraid of ruining their own life

1 response

All; politics covers these issues and dictates the changes made.

1 response

In my mind it was more related to justice and the justice system

1 response

Ability to purchase guns, exams, white power/privilege

1 response

Judicial system is the result of politics

1 response

Poet man and waiving extradition

1 response

capital punishment

1 response

Question 4

How do you think the content came across differently because it was presented as a play? What would have changed about how you viewed or reacted to the subject matter if I had simply given a lecture about the issues with statistics and facts?

Presenting the subjects in a play humanizes the victims of corruption and injustice in our criminal justice system in a way that cold facts and statistics cannot. While the facts and logic are of course integral to our understanding of these issues, we are emotional beings at heart. The play format appeals to this emotional aspect and allows us to empathize with individuals affected by these issues. Logic might carry the argument but emotion is what inspires change.

1 response

Hearing real human voices and seeing their emotions humanizes and brings the element of reality to what could be overlooked with numbers and statistics. It is easier to relate and sympathize and feel for human faces and emotion than it is to try and find meaning in abstract numbers.

1 response

The play was able to put a face to a story, even if it was an actor. Lectures can come across as biased or condescending, but when the "person" is telling the story in a first person narrative, it provides a level of impact that stories probably need.

1 response

Lectures with statistics and facts simple make people numbers while this turned more personal. I think it is a little hard to follow all the characters and their stories as they rotate however I think it evokes more pathos form the audience

1 response

A lecture on the statistics and facts may have had a beneficial impact on the amount of time and the severity of the events, but showing characters in a play conveys the emotions involved which are arguably more important.

1 response

The play generates empathy for the characters, both before you know what happened to them and then afterwards as they reflect on its lifelong traumatic consequences

1 response

It can be so easy to zone out over uncomfortable things on a lecture. When different actors look you directly in the eyes, you have no choice but to pay attention.

1 response

It focused on the people, which media reports of these kinds of crime don't do. You see the injustice manifest within the struggle for these people to continue.

1 response

I believe the content came across with more emotion and personal connection than if it was a lecture about the issue with statistics and facts.

1 response

The play made the issues more compelling than a lecture would be; the characters and their stories and emotions are more real and relatable.

1 response

It gave a more intimate and personal portrait of the topic and the people who have been victimized by the corruption

1 response

Anecdotes being told through the mouth of actual people allows you to humanize these stories.

1 response

I think it made it more accessible- rather than just presenting facts. Made it personal.

1 response

it was more personal and emotional to see each characters point of view

1 response

I felt like it made it more person and less of a "case" story

1 response

The emotions were portrayed better because it was a play.

1 response

It was more captivating and kept my attention.

1 response

Nothing

1 response



Question 5

Have you ever heard the term "political theatre" before?

View options

Yes

10 responses

No

8 responses

Question 7

Do you think you learned something tonight from this show?

View options

Yes

17 responses

I was moved, but I wouldn't say I learned something

1 response

Question 6

If so, please explain the context in which you have heard it discussed and what it means to you. If not, what do you assume it means?

I have heard it discussed in class and among friends who are interested in theater. To me, it means theater that not only responds to "political issues" but does so in a confrontational way. I say confrontational because we as viewers must confront the issues presented and our own beliefs about them.

1 response

Political theatre from what I understand is theatre meant to induce thought about political endeavors as well as pointing out flaws within the system. It raises awareness and then intends to start a conversation

1 response

I assume that political theater is meant to persuade the audience to act on a particular issue or even to change their opinion on that issue or debate.

1 response

I've heard your interest in it and I believe it is using the power of theatre and production to portray current or historic political issues.

1 response

I've heard it from the Liv's in my life. It is a way of commenting on political issues and messages by making it the center of the show.

1 response

I assume it is theatre that deals with a political issues and attempts to take a stance on one side or the other.

1 response

Theatre which discusses political themes and to me it means Theatre utilizing politics to emphasize a message

1 response

Theatre that addresses a political situation or concept and attempts to spread a specific political message

1 response

Theatre that aims to bring across a political message to the audience or convey a certain political theme.

1 response

Theatre pieces written and performed to convey a political message or advocate for change.

1 response

Normally, assume theatre that is about the political process: elections.

1 response

I assume that a political play addresses a political issue.

1 response

In class- theatre to make a point or prove a theory/fact.

1 response

I figure it is theatre that discusses political issues

1 response

theatre that contains issues of politics

1 response

In plays that talk about politicians

1 response

Fellow theatre artist involvement

1 response

None

1 response

Question 8

Do you think theatre has the power to convey social and political issues in a unique way? If so, what do you think makes the medium of a play unique?

Theatre can make social and political issues more universal and more relatable to an audience member. It allows an audience member to empathize more with someone they know is playing a part. It also makes the play better in making the audience members consider their own actions. Audience set actualization is always a goal

1 response

Yes. Plays are a visual, immersive format that allow us to connect with issues we may not experience ourselves or cause us to view them in a different way because it forces us to consider perspectives other than our own. As such, it proves a unique and highly useful way of presenting social and political issues.

1 response

It is unique because people are forced to sit next to people of all walks of life and experience the same thing. With media and technology, people are more isolated in relationships. Shared experiences are political experiences.

1 response

Yes—a play or other story-telling medium makes the issue more understandable and relatable and perhaps helps people think about the situation more sympathetically/seriously/urgently

1 response

yes because it can show emotion in a way that lectures cannot, as well as creating the story of a person and presenting it in a way that the audience is more likely to remember

1 response

Yes, I would say the same answer as mentioned a few questions ago, as the play provides a first person narrative that helps the audience experience the story.

1 response

Theatre inherently conveys issues in a unique way as it allows people to see other live humans in a way that TV, film, or other media can't compare to.

1 response

Yes I do. A play can present a social/political issue as a story. It provides more emotion which makes a political play very attention grabbing.

1 response

Yes!!! Again it makes it personal and the audience develops attachment to the people rather than the facts or something you hear on the news.

1 response

Yes; basically the ability to show emotion and to trigger reactions from both the characters involved and the audience.

1 response

Yes, I think a play is able to utilize blocking and having a live performance to fully convey a message

1 response

Yes. It is harder to ignore or dismiss bodies and voices—lived interactions—than a textual polemic

1 response

Yes, I think it allows a truth to be told in honor of those who are victims of an issue

1 response

YES. Hard to look away when there are live people expressing emotion.

1 response

Yes- more personalized and draws you into the story of the characters

1 response

Yes, the facial expressions, the emotional attachment.

1 response

Yes, the emotion and humanity it brings to stories

1 response

Yes

1 response

Question 9

Which of the following is most influential in how you shape your opinions and worldview?

[View options](#) ▼

☒ Emotions and stories

10 responses

☐ Logic and reasoning

5 responses

☐ Specific statistics and facts

3 responses

Question 10

Do you think theatre should teach moral lessons/inform the public about specific issues or simply serve as entertainment? Why?

1 response

Theater should be informative entertainment. While not all theater should just be one giant moral lesson, it should be entertaining material that still challenges us to at least think about it beyond that, and to reconsider our own beliefs and opinions.

1 response

Both! All theatre is political, even theatre that presumes a status quo in the way it entertains us. Catharsis is a great persuader, and the theatre is a critical part of the public sphere and should be a critical part of our collective ethical life

1 response

I think it depends on the situation. Certain theatre is strictly fun and entertainment BUT theatre is story telling and reflects the human experience. It has the ability to teach and inform and should definitely be used for these reasons.

1 response

I mean there is definitely a balance. If a piece is only trying to convey a message and doesn't have anything to make it interesting or watchable then the audience isn't going to care enough to pay attention to the message you're giving.

1 response

I definitely think that it should be used to teach moral lessons. There's something powerful about being drawn into real stories and real issues that make you open your eyes and challenge your thoughts and beliefs.

1 response

Theatre is meant to inspire, inform, and guide people to self actualization as well as entertainment. However it is up to the audience member what they individually take away from a show

1 response

I think both choices have merit. Entertainment value is important as sometimes people want to tune out and enjoy an evening, but important messages are good as it gives pieces substance.

1 response

I think theatre can do both at the same time—it can be entertaining but also have a deeper or more serious message, if only to make the audience think and gain a new perspective.

1 response

I think teaching lessons is important in all forms of art, as it allows a connection to the audience that just simply entertainment might not be able to reach

1 response

Absolutely because Theater can reach millions of people and make it more relatable and easier to understand than some condescending politician

1 response

I think it can do both and I think it can do both at the same time. I believe that it gives an outlet to inform an audience

1 response

Both. I don't like when I'm hit over the head with a message, but played out can be revealing or informative.

1 response

I think that there should be both theatre that informs as well as theatre that is only meant as entertaining

1 response

It should teach lessons because it is a unique experience that can do it subconsciously.

1 response

There should be a part of theatre to do this. Some theatre should be entertaining only

1 response

Yes. Theatre is a good medium for teaching a specific audience a lesson.

1 response

I think the theatre should teach moral lessons/inform the public.

1 response

It can do either; theatre is important for both.

1 response

Question 11

Please share any other thoughts regarding the role of theatre, the uniqueness of the medium of a play in sharing messages, or the place of politics in entertainment.

1 response

I think another pro to using media like this for political messages is it makes it more digestible for American audiences when confronted with viewpoints different from our own there is a tendency to freeze up or become defensive if the message is sprung too suddenly or in a way that can be viewed as aggressive but presenting ideas in a play and then people watching that and thinking "that's unfair" or "that's not right" let's them come to conclusions on their own and understand and accept messages more readily.

1 response

People too often say that politics should stay out of entertainment, but it's just like going to a church service prepared to move its audience. Being annoyed with or afraid to "get political" in things like this play is immature and stupid.

1 response

Theatre shares a message. It is an art form that can become anything based off of the writer and directors. It can share knowledge on any subject if done properly and can appeal to logos, pathos, and ethos ideals and even a mix

1 response

Entertainment is political, whether overtly or not, because entertainment shapes and reflects our society and culture which in turn shapes politics and vice versa. It's one big interactive cycle of influence.

1 response

Theatre impacts not only the audience seeing it but everyone working on a piece. Actors, directors, and designers all dig into the piece heavily and sometimes derive more meaning than audiences do.

1 response

Politics and entertainment should be together because it is an accessible way to teach people things about the government and social issues to people who otherwise wouldn't seek political info out

1 response

I really enjoyed the play. It was moving and eye opening. The fact that the story was displayed as a play allowed for the audience to have more of a personal connection with the piece.

1 response

A play can create poetry out of personal experiences and makes an individual representative, but that representation does not feel abstract because it's embodied by the actor

1 response

I think there is a fine line between theatre that addresses an issue and asks the audience to think and theatre that seeks to convince the audience of a specific viewpoint.

1 response

When informative and not preaching, can be very effective. Even if you don't change your mind, if you are moved to think, it's a measure of success.

1 response

This way a great performance. I definitely learned the emotional side of wrongful convictions and the personal affects. I was moved.

1 response

I definitely think that it is an effective way of bringing light to subjects that many people are afraid to address and talk about.

1 response

I think theatre has evolved in so many ways and is continually moving towards becoming more informative regarding real world issues

1 response

Enjoyed it. I think it does a great job of expressing difficult topics in a more accessible way.

1 response

I enjoyed the reading of this play and think the message was very important. Great job!

1 response

We need more theatre to speak to otherwise people who don't have a voice

1 response

Politics must be utilized more in the Theater to reach the masses

1 response

N/A

1 response